

LITHUANIAN PARTY NEARS THE BRINK

Top Communist Seeks to Lay
Basis for a Moscow Split

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VILNIUS, U.S.S.R., Dec. 19 — In the face of warnings and threats from the Kremlin, the Communist Party leader of Lithuania called today for independent Lithuanian statehood. He said the republic's party organization wanted to create conditions "in the immediate future" that would allow the republic to secede from the Soviet Union if it so chooses.

The party leader, Algirdas Brazauskas, was speaking here on the opening day of the Lithuanian Communist Party congress, at which the local branch of the Soviet Communist Party is expected to vote overwhelmingly to break away from the leadership in Moscow and form a wholly independent Communist Party. These moves strongly and repeatedly condemned by President Mikhail S. Gorbachev.

In outlining a program for the sweeping reorganization of the Lithuanian Communist Party, Mr. Brazauskas said to loud cheers at the Vilnius opera and ballet theater that the independence of the republic's party would "guarantee Lithuania's independence and safety" and "would make it possible to build in the immediate future a Soviet Union from which it would be possible to secede if we wanted to."

Another Step

The almost certain decision by the party to break away from Moscow follows a vote earlier this month by the Lithuanian legislature sanctioning a multiparty system, making it the first Soviet republic to join East European countries in abolishing the Communist Party's monopoly on power.

There are now officially five parties



The Lithuanian Communist leader said yesterday that the local party wanted to create conditions that would allow independent statehood.

As the party congress took place, demonstrators carried banners calling for a "sovereign independent Communist Party of Lithuania."

in Lithuania, and the Communist Party has been struggling to maintain its power and position as the number and popularity of these parties and other grass-roots political movements rises.

The speech by Mr. Brazauskas, and the documents presented at the congress today detailing the party's determination to be independent, are the most explicit and far-reaching pronouncements by the Lithuanian Communist leadership in support of the growing desire for Lithuanian independence from the Soviet Union.

The session was carried live on radio, and tapes of the entire session were broadcast tonight on television here.

Leaders of Lithuanian political groups praised Mr. Brazauskas's speech and the decision, expected to be approved on Wednesday, splitting the republic's party from Moscow.

Arvydas Juozaitis, a leader of Sąjūdis, the most popular political group in

Lithuania, called the party's move a "dress rehearsal" for the eventual secession of the republic from the Soviet Union. "We are getting acquainted with the process," he said.

The Soviet constitution gives republics the right to secede, although the provision has never been tested and the Kremlin has indicated that it would severely resist any attempts to do so.

Lithuania and the other Baltic republics, Latvia and Estonia, were independent states between the world wars, until Stalin annexed them to the Soviet Union as part of a secret pact with Hitler dividing Eastern Europe into spheres of influence.

The Soviet leadership has now acknowledged that the Stalin-Hitler treaty was illegal, but asserted that the Baltic republics nonetheless joined the Soviet Union voluntarily.

Earlier this year, the Lithuanian legislature decreed that the puppet government installed by Stalin, which

formally requested membership in the Soviet Union, had acted illegally.

In his speech today, Mr. Brazauskas said that although Lithuania's experience with independence was brief, "it left a deep mark in our people's consciousness." Therefore, he said, restoring Lithuanian statehood was the top priority of the party.

Although he did not advocate immediate secession from the Soviet Union, saying "the way to independence is a process with its own sequence and strategy, its own stages and immediate and long-term goals," Mr. Brazauskas made very clear the ultimate aim of the Lithuanian Communist Party.

"We are in favor of a sovereign Lithuanian state," said the party leader, who has been rebuked several times by Mr. Gorbachev for his organization's defiance of Moscow's control. "I would like to remind you that according to international law, sovereignty means

political independence and the independence of the state in its domestic and foreign policy."

The Kremlin has been trying to appease the Baltic republics by gradually introducing greater political and economic autonomy in the region.

Mr. Brazauskas, who is popular at home for standing up to Moscow, also urged an incremental path toward independence. But his explicit endorsement of independence, and his bold mention of the possibility of secession, are almost certain to anger Mr. Gorbachev, who is beleaguered by ethnic splits and internal discontent within the party and country.

There are those who have called the Lithuanian party's move to independence a sign of "concession, capitulation and feebleness," Mr. Brazauskas said, adding: "But that is not right. What it means is that the party is maturing and becoming more democratic."